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SUBJECT: INSIDE TURKMENISTAN'S DISCOTHEQUES -- HITCH UP
YOUR TRADITIONAL DRESS

REF: ASHGABAT 1076

1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

2. (SBU) SUMMARY: Turkmenistan's clubs represent an opportunity for young people to dress and act more liberally. At the same time, youth maintain a sense of modesty and do not seriously challenge cultural traditions. Many Turkmen are too worried about finding work to consider going out regularly. Politics and other sensitive topics are rarely discussed at the discotheques. Prostitution is endemic to most major clubs in the country and is likely to grow as the country attracts more foreign businessmen. END SUMMARY.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING IDLE

3. (SBU) A minority of Turkmenistan's youth regularly go to the discotheques. Those that go to clubs are likely to be from more affluent families or hold steady jobs. Although one might expect the percentage of people going to clubs to rise markedly because of a more relaxed atmosphere under the new regime, many Turkmen are preoccupied with finding work or are content to simply drink in private. For less affluent young men, it is very popular to simply find a place to drink alcohol with their buddies. Young women generally are expected to remain at home and help with household chores.

INSIDE TURKMENISTAN'S CLUBS

4. (SBU) The "Florida" nightclub in Ashgabat is generally considered the best club in Turkmenistan, although many hotels that cater to foreigners, such as the Nissa and Ak Altyn, have some sort of dance hall or discotheque. More prestigious clubs charge around 100,000 manat (about \$70) as an entrance fee. However, the fee is usually waived for foreigners who are more likely to buy drinks and spend money. Periodically, smaller clubs are closed to the general public when they are rented out to wealthy (usually Russian or Turkish) patrons. Each club generally has a dance floor and sitting area with a bar and plays a combination of Russian and Euro-pop and American top-40 hits, often uncomfortably loudly.

PROFESSIONAL LADIES OF THE EVENING

15. (SBU) Prostitution, mostly catering to foreign businessmen, is endemic in Ashgabat's clubs. Many prostitutes have at least a rudimentary knowledge of English. Prostitution is somewhat less prevalent (though certainly still present) in smaller clubs around the country that are frequented mainly by students. Club owners will generally make some attempt to ensure that girls who are too young (below 18) are not allowed in.

MODEST BY DAY? ROLL YOUR STOCKINGS DOWN AT NIGHT

16. (SBU) Turkmenistan's conservative culture discourages revealing clothing among its ethnic Turkmen population. However, many young women wish to dress in the latest Western fashion and use an outing to the nightclub as an excuse to wear slinky dresses and bare their shoulders. Frequently, these women will change back into traditional Turkmen dresses as soon as they return home.

LOOK BUT DON'T TOUCH

17. (SBU) Although a growing number of Turkmen are eager to dress and act in a more "Western" manner, there is still a sense of modesty and propriety even on the dance floor. Public displays of affection are rare, although increasing. In contrast to Western dancing, men and women will often not hold hands or maintain prolonged body contact with one another. It is also customary for groups of young women to

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dance in a circle and for young men to form their own, separate circle of dancing.

WHY TALK POLITICS WHEN YOU CAN DANCE?

18. (SBU) Many young people are not well informed politically and rarely talk politics at the discotheque, preferring lighter topics. Those that do discuss politics are heavily influenced by Russian media and generally take a pro-Russia stance, for example on the conflict in Georgia (reftel). Those working for transnational corporations or in professions that deal with many foreigners are more likely to expound nuanced positions.

19. (SBU) COMMENT. Turkmenistan's nightlife is rife with contradiction. While young people see the discotheques as an engine of counterculture, there are still cultural boundaries very much in place, and sensitive topics are rarely broached. Importantly, the clubs do function as a form of escapism for a generation of young people struggling with high unemployment and limited opportunities. Prostitution remains the biggest problem in these clubs and is likely to thrive by catering to the increasing numbers of foreign businessmen.
END COMMENT.
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